

HERASIM LEBEDEFF (1746-1817)

There were few Russians who visited India before Indology appeared as a branch of science who have left written testimonies of their stay in that country in spite of the fact that India was known in Russia practically since the beginnings of its existence and during the three periods of its history: Kiew, Moscow, St. Petersburg.

One of the few travellers was Lebedeff, not very well known even in his own country, and of course, much less in the Occident, although he has to his credit two publications¹⁻². But he was the first person to start in India en European theatre for Indians in the Bengali language and may be considered as the forerunner of the modern Indian theatre; he tried to encourage a closer contact between the two cultures, Russian and Indian. Therefore I think that it's worth while writing a few lines about this « Russian adventurer » who was so different from those of other nationalities, having spent years in India in the XVIII century.

His name is rather seldom mentioned, sometimes strongly criticized, sometimes praised very much.

As I mentioned before, India was not unknown in Russia. Direct translations from Greek or through the meridional Slavonic remain in written literature. The most ancient one is the *Report on wealthy India*, followed by the *The enchanted Indian reign*, a Christian version from a Buddhist motive, *Stefani and Ikhnilat*, a narrative based upon *Pañcha-*

* Universidad de la República Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias, Tristan Narvaja 1674, Montevideo (Uruguay).

1. HERASIM LEBEDEFF, *A Grammar of the Pure and Mixed East Indian Dialects*, II ed., Edited with a biography and bibliography by Dr. Mahadev Prasad Saha and a Foreword by Dr. S. K. Chatterji, Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963.

2. LEBEDEV, HERASIM STEPANOVICH, *Bezpristrastnoe sozertsanie sistem vostochnoy Indii Bramgenov svyashchenuikh obryadov ikh i narodnuikh obichayew*, St. Petersburg, 1805. (The « Impartial Review...).

tantra. In oral literature, one of the principal characters of the « Byliny » (ancient epic songs) is the Diuk Stepanowich, an Indian prince.

Probably knowledge about India got to Russia through Russian tradesmen who were meeting Indian merchants in the cities of Itil and Bulgar on the river Volga. The trade between Russia and India was quite considerable. India imported horses and armaments, Russia silk and articles of luxury. There was also another direct contact, but of those Russian « travellers » most probably none returned, at least there is no account of it till now. I mean the Russian slaves. Many of them went to India via Bulgar, already mentioned above, and in later times through Caffa in Crimea. They sometimes took active parts in wars as soldiers in proper India, as it happened in the operations of Ghias-ud Din Tugluq against Khusrau Khan.

The first Russian who spent six years in India (1466-72) and left a written account about his stay there was Afanasi Nikitin, a merchantman from Twer³. He started a journey to Shirvan (actually in Aserbeidjan), then a flourishing city and one of the centers of East-west commerce, but, having been robbed and lost almost all of his merchandise, he went on and having crossed the three seas (therefore the title of his work): Caspian, Black and the Indian Ocean, landed in India and lived there, having sold a foal which he brought from Persia. The importation of horses was one of the most important items of Indian commerce and Nikitin gained enough to be able to live, very modestly, for some time. He lived among the Hindu people, and not being a Muslim, he had no difficulties to establish relations with them and even took part in a pilgrimage to some temple, describing it and the statues of the Hindu gods. His narration gives interesting glimpses not only into the life of the ordinary people but also about Mahmoud Gavan and his wars between the Kingdom of Bahmani, where Nikitin lived and Vijayanagar.

Following Nikitin's account Russia had to wait for three centuries for some description of a part of India written by an eyewitness, in spite of the fact that the commercial intercourse between the two countries was never interrupted and that efforts were even made to establish permanent and direct diplomatic relations. As to the former, there existed in Astrakhan an Indian colony between the XVII and XVIII centuries and another near Baku and Indian merchants travelled as far as Moscow and even later to St. Petersburg. As far as the latter is concerned, there was an embassy from Babur to Vasiliy III in 1532 and a Russian one went in 1675 but had not been received by Aurangzeb; two Russian merchants sent by Peter the Great not only had an audience with the same Mogol but travelled in India, visiting Delhi, Agra and Surat. Those merchants had no diplomatic commissions, they only went to establish trade relations. And we have two more travellers in the XVIII century: the Georgian prince Danibegow, a Russian subject, who

3. NIKITIN, AFANASI, *Khozhdenie za Tri Morya*, II ed., ANSSSR, Moskov, 1958.

wrote about his journey and Yefremow who lived in India from 1774 to 1782. He was a non-commissioned officer of the Russian Army, taken prisoner by tribesmen in Siberia, sold in Bukhara, from where he escaped after a journey through Tibet and Kashmir, went to Delhi and then journeyed overland to Calcutta, being helped by the population and saved by an Indian physician when he fell ill. His book is in some ways reminiscent of Nikitin, both speak with love and sympathy about the common people and also remark the enormous difference between the poor and the rich.

All those a.m. works are personal impressions of eye-witnesses of Indian life, but Lebedeff was the first in Russia or even in Eastern Europe to inform his countrymen not only about India as seen by him but also about India's culture-and here lies his merit.

We only know about Lebedeff's life what he wrote himself in the introductions to his two books; he wasn't a well known person and finished his life as a civil servant in a not too high position. He was born in 1746, son of an orthodox priest and he did not have much education; at the age of fifteen he could only read and write Russian and had some knowledge of music. We don't know any more about his life until 1775 when he left Russia as a member of the embassy of count Rasumowski, who was well known as a man of great culture, designated as ambassador to Naples. But the war between Prussian and Austria held up the journey and Lebedeff decided to continue his journey alone. He got letters of recommendation from the Russian ambassador in Vienne, prince Golitsyn and from count Rasumowsky, which helped him a lot. In 1782 he arrived at Paris where he was introduced to the future Czar Paul I who probably helped him in some form, too. He came to England in the same year, earning his living as musician (violinist) and acquired knowledge of the English language. We do not know why he decided to go to India nor how he made the journey-as musician or passenger. He landed-1785 in Madras, was well received by the Mayor of the town and stayed there for two years teaching music. He acquired some knowledge of, as he says, the Malabar vernacular (Tamil?). But having heard that Calcutta could give him more possibilities to exercise his arts and also had greater facilities for learning Indian Culture («Madras did not enable me to learn the wisdom of the Brahmins, for their rudiments are written in spiritual language which no Indian was capable of explaining to me in English», he went to Calcutta where he spent ten years. He was well received by some high officials of the East India Company and spent his time teaching music, giving musical performances and studying with a Bengali pundit, Golack Nath Das and others. He studied, it seems, Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi, the «Brahmin alphabet, dictionary, grammar, arithmetic, calendar and other subjects», translated from English to Bengali two comedies and from Bengali to Russian some poetry of the great Bengal poet Bharat Chandra Ray Gunakar. And then, encouraged by his friend and teacher, he decided to put on stage one of the

translated English plays. This was the cause why Lebedeff is mentioned by some European and Indian authors. But that was also the cause of his downfall and of his leaving his beloved Calcutta and India.

He had got permission from the Governor to perform his plays on the stage. He got no help from the English theater and decided to launch his enterprise at his own risk. He rented a house and being his own architect and supervisor of the construction, director, regisseur (he found three women and ten men, Bengalis) and November 1795 one of his translated comedies, the « Disguise » was performed. It seems that it was a success and in July 1796 he repeated the performance. But this success was also the cause of Lebedeffs ruin. There began a campaign against him, sponsored by the managers of the European theatres and some members of the British community. Lebedeff was rather ingenious and idealist as he was, fell victim of his ennemies. To cut a long story short, he was ruined, had to sell his theater, fell ill and finally left Calcutta no richer as when he came to India. Therefore to call him « adventurer » is at least a mistake, remembering the « nabobs », his contemporaries. He left India as a pauper. His only luggage consisted of a few articles of clothes. But he carried with him the direct knowledge of the Indian people and its culture and some notebooks. We do not know when he reached London⁴ where he published his « Grammar ». It is not known when he returned to Russia, where he published his « Impartial Review... » in 1805, worked as interpreter at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but did not reach a distinguished rank. He died in 1817 and was buried in St. Petersburg. His epitaph says:

Lebedeff, Gerasim Stepanovich

*Translator of Indian Languages at the Foreign College
Court Councillor and Knight;*

Died 15th July, 1817, aged 71 years.

He was the first son of Russia

Who travelled in Eastern India

Noted the customs of the people and brought

The Indian language back to his native land.

This is a slight exaggeration; Lebedeff, as we know, was not the first Russian who travelled in India. But, true, he brought a knowledge of Indian languages and was the first to cast Indian types for printing, but it is not clear if they were Bengali or Devanāgarī.

As already said, Lebedeffs name doesn't appear too often in works about Indology. Even in his own country after the revolution he isn't even mentioned in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia⁴. Barthold⁵ writes « ... le musicien Guérasim Lébédév... partit aux Indes ou il resta douze

4. E. RADZINSKI, *Le premier indianiste russe-fondateur du theatre Bengali*, Informations Unesco No. 315, Paris, 1958.

5. V. V. BARTHOLD, *La découverte de l'Asie*, Payot, Paris, 1947.

ans... étudiant le sanscrit et surtout les langues indiennes modernes, principalement le bengali... publia en 1801 en anglais une grammaire des idiomes de l'inde, y compris le sanscrit... a St. Petersburg il fonda une typographie avec des caracteres sanscrites et en 1805 publia la Contemplation... ». In this statement there is a mistake: Lebedeffs grammar contains no sanskrit. The studies of this language began only much later⁶. Beskrowni⁷ mentions Lebedeffs work as the beginning of the study of modern Indian languages. Schwab⁸ devotes some lines to Lebedeff, Alayew & Vapha⁹ call our author « the founder of Russian Indology; v. Glasenapp¹⁰ writes: « Englische Stücke in bengalischen Übersetzung wurden bereits in dem Theater des Russen Lebedeff in Kalkutta aufgeführt ».

The most information about Lebedeff we can find in his Grammar¹ and in Bharat-Rus¹¹.

The Grammar (II edition) reproduces the title-page of the original, a rather long one as it was the custom in those times, contains a foreword written by Suniti Kumar Chatterji who criticizes the Grammar, mentions Lebedeffs importance what the theatre is concerned and praises him very much for his humanistic ideas and sympathy, love and appreciation of the Indian culture. The same author mentions Lebedeff in his « Languages... »¹² as a « Russian fortune seeker who was also something of a scholar and a man of culture » but doesn't mention the Grammar only Lebedeffs starting the first Bengali theater in the European style. Mahadeva Prasad Saha gives some information of Russian-Indian relations, a short biography of Lebedeff and the appreciation of his work. Then are notes on some persons mentioned by Lebedeff, a chronological list of grammars of modern Indian languages upto 1800, Lebedeffs own introduction, a preface where he criticizes W. Jones, giving as example 3 shlokas of Bhaja Govindam, convinced that the Calcutta pronunciation of, as he calls, the Shamscrit Language is better than the Varanasi one, and finally the Grammar with a small dictionary and dialogues. According to all authors who mention the grammar, it has now only historical value and maybe contains some information about the Bazar Hindi of Calcutta in those days. Of course, there should be a comparaison with other grammars written at the same time...

Unfortunately I do not have the « Impartial Review »², having lost my copy during the war; some years ago I tried to find the book in

6. W. I. KALIANOW, *Izuchienie sanskrita w Rossii*, Uchionyie zapiski Leningradskowo gos. un. Nr. 304, Leningrad, 1962.

7. W. M. BIESKROWNYI, *Iz istorii izuchienia shywykh indijskikh iazykow w Rossii w XIX wiekie*, Wiestnik Len. Un. Nr. 8, Leningrad, 1957.

8. R. SCHWAB, *La renaissance orientale*, Payot, Paris, 1950.

9. L. B. ALAYEV, A. K. VAPHA, *Indology*, USSR Ac. of Sc., Moscow, 1968.

10. H. v. GLASENAPP, *Die Literaturen Indiens*, Kröner, Stuttgart, 1961.

11. P. M. KEMP, *Bharat-Rus*, ISCUS, Delhi, 1958.

12. S. K. CHATTERJI, *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*, Prakash Bhavan, Calcutta, 1963.

Polish libraries, but unsuccessfully, so I can only suggest reading the « Grammar » and « Bharata-Rus » which contain excerpts from the work.

Lebedeff tried to give his countrymen an idea about Indias culture, religion, customs. He put down what he saw and what he learned from his teachers, without the many prejudices we can find in other books written by Europeans. He doesn't condemn the customs, the way of life, traditions, ideas and beliefs of the Indian people. He saw rather the similarities in comparing East and West and not the differences. He believed in the Unity of human thinking, searching for the eternal and universal truth.

He tried also to establish Indological studies in Russia. It was not his fault that Russian indology came to life many years after Lebedeff. But, born late, this branch of learning has, no doubt about it, an important place among the results of other peoples. Has and had, to mention only the two Sanscrit dictionaries (the St. Petersbourg dictionaries) or the names of Wassiliew, Minaew or Stchierbatskoi.